

# Raising Literacy Levels With Collaborative On-Site Professional Development in an Urban Disadvantaged School

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A multifaceted, collaborative professional development intervention that uses a range of strategies, tools, and methodologies and raises literacy standards can offer teachers greater instructional self-efficacy and deeper knowledge about how to implement a research-based, balanced literacy framework while also responding to the needs of individual students and small groups.

Well, I think that the most important resource was the teacher, and then you've invested a lot into us and in our training. So I think that's the best thing...even if the books go or if we're in a different school, we'll still have, it's all in us, everything that we've done.... That it's the whole thing about..., like it's the teacher is the most important resource in the room all the time and that's really, you know, the program has changed us as teachers. (Mary, classroom teacher, final interview)

**M**ary, a classroom teacher in a highly disadvantaged urban school in Dublin, Ireland, participated in a two-year intervention designed to improve literacy levels. The intervention drew on a wide range of international research on effective literacy teachers (Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2003; Topping & Ferguson, 2005; Wray, Medwell, Poulson, & Fox, 2002), on schools that had beaten the odds and succeeded in helping the

majority of their pupils to perform well in literacy, despite their socioeconomic status (e.g., Designs for Change, 1997; Johnson & Asera, 1999), and on effective professional development for teachers (e.g., Au, Raphael, & Mooney, 2008; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001).

Mindful that students who struggle with reading often receive qualitatively different and less motivating instruction than that experienced by high-achieving students (Allington, 1983; Knapp, 1995), the intervention sought to ensure that there was sufficient focus on metacognition and higher order thinking skills, the purposes of reading and writing, the application of skills in meaningful contexts, the use of formative assessment, and briskly paced instruction that capitalized on students' interests. As Mary's comments indicate, a key element of the project was professional development. Although much is now known about the essential elements of effective literacy programs (i.e., alphabetics, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and writing; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Pressley, 2001), we also know that simply including these elements in instructional frameworks is not enough to ensure success and realize the elusive goal of closing the achievement gap between students in affluent and high-poverty neighborhoods (Gamse, Bloom, Kemple, & Jacob, 2008; Taylor et al., 2003).

How these essential skills are mediated in the classroom (and in the students' homes) is of critical importance, as is the extent to which programs respond to the learning needs of the students while also motivating and engaging them in literacy. To succeed, an effective classroom program requires a creative, responsive, and knowledgeable teacher

like Mary who is prepared to participate in extensive professional development over a number of years. The program in which Mary and her colleagues participated sought to equip them with a repertoire of strategies, tools, and methodologies from which they could choose and which would enable them to make critical decisions on what was appropriate for their particular context and for the particular stages of development of their students.

This article describes the collaborative professional development program that was implemented in Mary's school. First, the broad policy context in which the program was implemented is described. Then, the features of the professional development intervention are outlined. Following this, outcomes of the intervention are considered and conclusions drawn.

## The Policy Context

Ireland does well in international studies of reading literacy, ranking sixth of 56 countries in reading literacy in the Program for International Student Assessment involving 15-year-olds in 2006 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007). Yet students attending schools in urban disadvantaged areas perform well below national standards. In a 2003 survey of reading standards in disadvantaged schools, almost 30% of students in grades 1, 3, and 6 achieved scores at or below the 10th percentile on a nationally standardized test (Eivers, Shiel, & Shortt, 2004). The study indicated that those at greatest risk are students who attend the most disadvantaged schools, receive free medical care, are boys, have very low attendance, have few books in their homes, and were read to infrequently before formal schooling. Principal teachers of schools in the study cited challenges their schools faced, including low parental literacy levels, lack of support from parents, disinterest in learning among students, large class sizes, and poor access to psychological assessments.

How can we characterize reading instruction in such schools? In 2005, the Inspectorate of the Irish Department of Education and Science (DES, 2005b) reported that, although teachers in very disadvantaged schools demonstrated strong skills in teaching emergent literacy, beginning reading, and basic reading comprehension, aspects of the broader school learning environment were problematic. The inspectorate called for:

## Reflection Question

How does this kind of professional expertise enhancement program differ from the training offered teachers when a new commercial reading program is adopted for a school?

- Establishment of stronger links between whole-school planning, individual teachers' preparation, and their everyday practice in relation to literacy
- More differentiated approaches for catering to students with varying learning abilities
- Enhanced classroom-based assessment, leading to stronger links between assessment, teaching, and learning
- Greater involvement of class teachers with special education programs and development of a more cohesive approach to intervention
- Engagement of teachers in school-based professional development that is sensitive to the specific needs of schools

Also in 2005, the DES launched a new program called DEIS (DES, 2005a) with a view to improving the identification of disadvantaged schools and providing more focused programs in literacy and other areas. DEIS promotes two initiatives intended to improve literacy levels in urban elementary schools: Reading Recovery (e.g., Clay, 2002) and First Steps (Education Department of Western Australia, 1994). Other key elements include enhanced professional development in literacy for teachers (mainly focused on implementing First Steps writing) and support for schools in establishing literacy targets and developing three-year plans to reach those targets. Currently, under DEIS, professional development in literacy is provided for schools by a small cohort of advisors, working under the auspices of the Primary Professional Development Service, but such support is often insufficient. Hence, university-led professional development was proposed for the school in which Mary and her colleagues work.

## Features of the Professional Development Intervention

### *The Project Site*

Mary's school, St Joseph's, is situated in the heart of a high-poverty community. The neighborhood is affected by many of the social ills that make learning to read a challenge, including high unemployment (three times the national average), low educational attainment (only 5% of adults have a third-level qualification), large numbers of lone parents (about four times the national average), and high levels of social problems such as drug use and crime. St. Joseph's is a K-2 school serving predominantly Irish students, with less than 1% of its population from overseas (an atypical pattern in Irish schools today). There are four class teachers at each grade level (with up to 15 students per class) and five full-time special education teachers (SETs), working across the grade levels. Following consultation with the whole staff, it was decided to begin the change process with the four first-grade classes (56 students: 25 boys, 31 girls), their class and support teachers, and their parents, and continue with these classes into second grade, with extension to other classes later. A small grant allowed for the provision of leveled texts to support program implementation.

### *Gathering Evidence*

In implementing the project, a range of data was gathered, both to inform ongoing implementation and track the development of the teachers and students. Interview data were gathered from classroom teachers (individually, three times), SETs (focus group, twice), 20 students (with varying achievement levels, on three occasions), and parents (focus groups, once). Questions addressed a range of issues, including participants' perceptions of the effects of the intervention and ways in which it could be progressed further. Assessment data (formative and standardized) and data based on three observations of each classroom teacher engaged in instruction were also gathered and are described in greater detail below.

### *Implementing the Change Process*

A key element of the change process was the nature of the relationship between the facilitator (a teacher educator) and the participants. It was established

as a collaborative venture whereby the "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) of both parties were considered of equal value and vital to the program. This collaboration was productive, as it allowed a certain amount of "risk-taking, testing out the worth of ideas...challenging the ideas of others...and deepening each other's contributions to the product or task" (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 124). In professional development sessions, the teachers and facilitator cooperated to discover what could work in the school context.

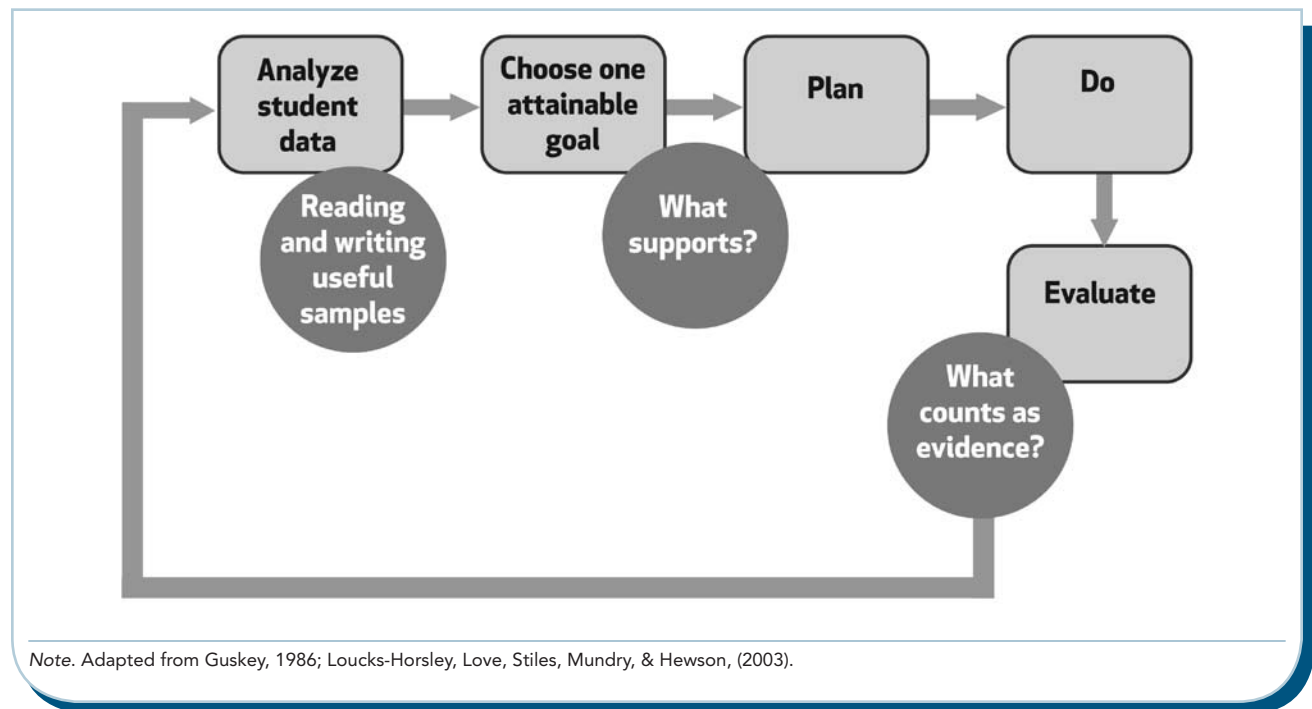
Using a change model (Figure 1) that drew on the work of Guskey (1986) and Loucks-Horsley, Love, Stiles, Mundry, and Hewson (2003), the teachers and facilitator worked through a process of change in five incremental phases over two school years (Table 1). At the outset, students' current achievement in literacy was measured and analyzed to identify strengths and weaknesses. Then, the facilitator and teachers negotiated and prioritized the first steps in the change process. For example, having examined baseline assessment data (writing samples and results of a screening test of early literacy), weaknesses were observed in students' ability to record their thoughts on paper to a level that was decodable by an adult.

The facilitator and teachers decided to introduce a daily 30-minute writing workshop with the goals of supporting students to articulate their ideas further, motivating students to view writing as purposeful, and moving those writing at a semiphonetic level (Gentry, 1982) to a phonetic level. The professional development program sought to ensure that the early goals that teachers set were achievable (Guskey, 1986). Each time a goal was successfully achieved, a new goal was set, and the cycle of change began again. The elements of the professional development program are summarized in Table 2 and described in more detail below.

### **Sustained, Intensive On-Site Professional Development.**

Professional development was delivered primarily on site once per fortnight for approximately two hours over two school years. Several full days and a couple of half-days were also provided for intensive work in both years. Sessions were multifaceted and included professional development in which a new aspect of literacy was explored, debate around the professional readings that teachers had been engaged in, examination of pupils' work and test results, planning for implementation of changes,

**Figure 1**  
Change Model Driving the Intervention



**Table 1**  
Outline of the Five Phases of Change in the Intervention

Change phases	Activities
<b>Phase 1</b> First grade November–December	Daily writing workshop (Calkins, 2003; Graves, 1994), minilesson, conference, and share session
<b>Phase 2</b> First grade January–March	Phase 1 activities and daily word study (synthetic/analytic phonics, sight vocabulary)
<b>Phase 3</b> First grade April–June	Phases 1 and 2 activities plus guided reading using leveled texts (Calkins, 2001; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), application of word-identification strategies to reading, and strategy glove (McLaughlin, 2003)
<b>Phase 4</b> Second grade September–December	Phases 1–3 activities plus extension of writing workshop to include genre writing (fiction, nonfiction, and poetry), comprehension strategies using the gradual release of responsibility model (Fielding & Pearson, 1994; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), strategies used by good readers (i.e., visualizing, making predictions, making connections, asking questions, summarizing, and monitoring), metacognition (Paris, Lipson, & Wixson, 1994), and fiction and nonfiction texts
<b>Phase 5</b> Second grade January–June	Phases 1–4 activities plus vocabulary (tiers 1–3 words; Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002), fluency (Rasinski, 2004), and multiple strategies instruction (reciprocal teaching [Oczkus, 2003] and literature circles [Brabham & Villaume, 2000])

**Table 2**  
**Research-Supported Characteristics of Effective Professional Development**

Characteristics	Reference
Sustained over time	Au, Raphael, & Mooney, 2008; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2003
On site	Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Kinnucan-Welsch, Rosemary, & Grogan, 2006
Customized	Au et al., 2008; Kinnucan-Welsch et al., 2006
Gradual and builds early success	Guskey, 2000
Based on constructivist principles	Cambourne, 2002; Kinnucan-Welsch et al., 2006; Thompson & Zeuli, 1999
Grounded in the content and pedagogical skills of teaching	Garet et al., 2001; Shulman, 1987
Honors teacher creativity and autonomy	Au et al., 2008
Nonevaluative observations	Cordingley, Bell, Rundell, & Evans, 2003; Shanahan, 2002
Pupil assessment data tracked and used to evaluate effectiveness of pedagogical changes	Kinnucan-Welsch et al., 2006; Villegas-Reimers, 2003

and reaction to new methods already tried. Whereas class teachers attended all of the sessions, SETs attended about half.

**Grounded in Content and Pedagogical Knowledge.** An essential element was the provision of professional readings to enhance teachers' content knowledge in alphabets, comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, and writing and supporting teachers' in combining these elements into a balanced literacy framework suitable to their context (Figure 2). The transfer of the framework to teaching practice is evident in the weekly schedule in place at the end of the intervention (Table 3).

The professional reading material provided to teachers created a certain level of "cognitive dissonance" (Thompson & Zeuli, 1999), leading teachers to question their current methods and beliefs around literacy teaching. As Bridget, another teacher, said: "I got a lot from the readings. Challenging stuff, made me think. In reality, we've been doing it wrong for the past 20 years." Many of the professional readings included strategies needed to teach key content and incorporated classroom vignettes of the strategies in action (see Table 1 for examples of readings). Teachers were of the opinion that this and other aspects of the professional development had changed

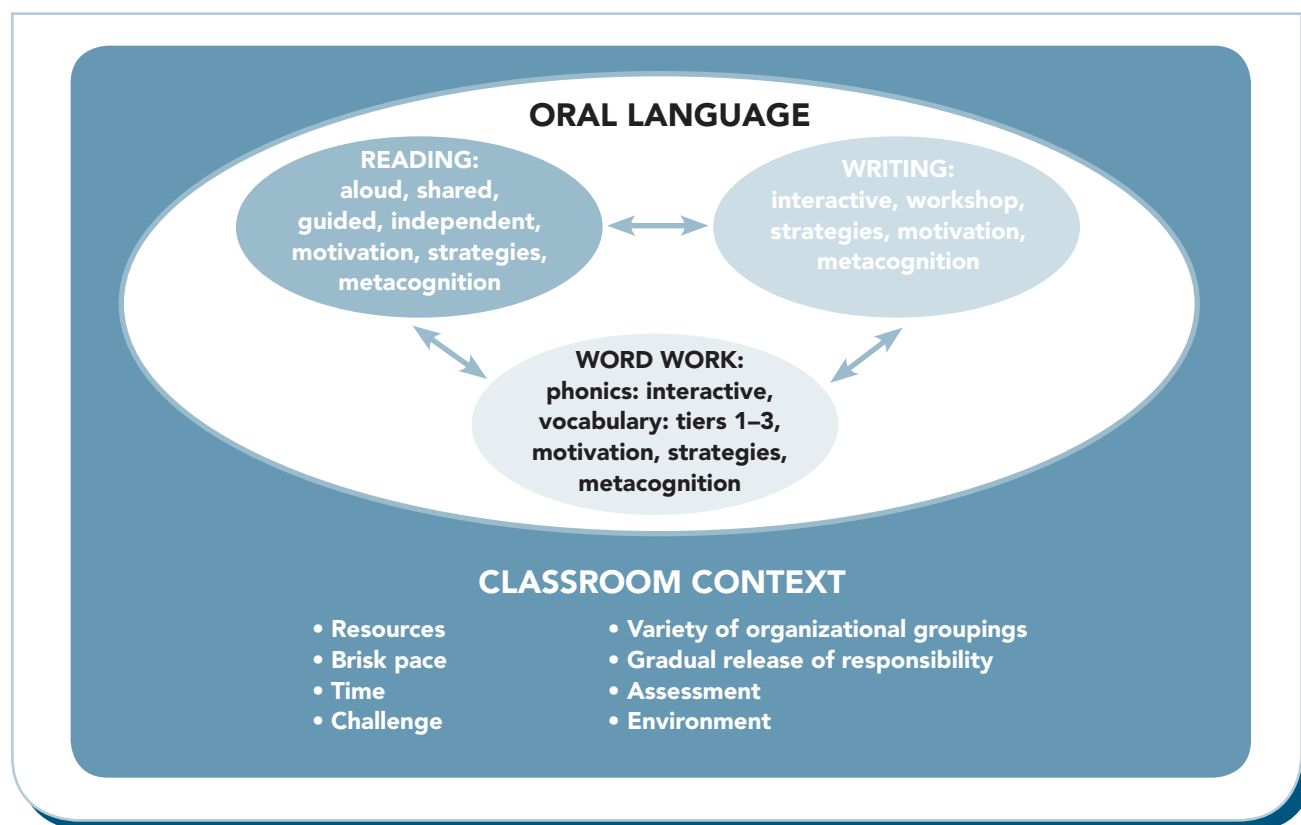
them as teachers, with one remarking that "our knowledge has gone up one million percent" (Mary, classroom teacher, final interview).

**Based on Constructivist Principles and Honoring Teacher Autonomy.** The professional readings were given to teachers prior to the professional development sessions and regular planning meetings. Teachers had time to debate issues, reflect on their practice, and decide with facilitator guidance on the direction of the change process. A key element was helping teachers understand the theory and philosophy underpinning the methodologies shared with them. The goal was to honor teacher autonomy and encourage teachers to use the research base "to provide the grounds for their choices and actions" (Shulman, 1987, p. 13). It was critical that they own the new material and in effect transform it. According to Cambourne (2002), this involves the learner in transferring the knowledge they have newly acquired and the demonstrations they observed (discussed in the next section) into a set of understandings that is uniquely their own.

This approach encourages teachers to experiment and innovate in ways that suit their personality and teaching style while also honoring an overall framework and structure for best practice in literacy.



**Figure 2**  
**A Balanced Literacy Framework**



Grainger, Gooch, and Lambirth (2005) suggested that creative teachers adopt “a learner-centered focus...responding to children’s feelings, engaging their interests, maintaining their identity and autonomy” (p. 183). Teachers appreciated the nonprescriptive nature of the balanced literacy framework and professional development sessions:

And it happened to suit my type of personality, I think, in that it was quite broad. And it honored the individual needs of the children and their way of going through a process, which I really would feel very strongly about, and also offered an opportunity for each child to develop and bring what their particular creative strain is in the world, you know? (Bridget, classroom teacher, final interview)

**Demonstration and Observation.** The research literature on effective professional development indicated that teachers who experience collaborative approaches to professional development involving classroom observation and feedback have stronger

beliefs in themselves and their power to change things compared with those who have experienced observation in a supervisory or accountability context and have not received feedback (Cordingley, Bell, Rundell, & Evans, 2003). During the intervention, at the request of the teachers, the facilitator visited classrooms to demonstrate lessons each time a new component was added to the instructional program. Observation frameworks adapted from Shanahan’s (2002) Chicago Reading Initiative were devised, and as teachers watched the facilitator teach lessons, the teachers looked for evidence of the various elements and stages of a particular lesson and noted the students’ engagement. These frameworks also served as useful supports for teachers as they set about structuring their own lessons. At three points in the intervention, the facilitator visited classrooms and observed teachers, using these same frameworks. The professional dialogue that occurred following demonstrations and observations served to strengthen the

**Table 3**  
**Timetable at End of Year 2**

	All Monday and Friday classes (class teachers only)	Tuesday–Thursday (SETs rotate between regular classes)
Writing workshop	9:00–9:40: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Minilesson</li> <li>■ Conference</li> <li>■ Share session</li> <li>■ Genre writing (fiction, nonfiction, and poetry)</li> </ul>	9:00–9:40: Classes B and D 9:40–10:20: Classes A and C <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Minilesson</li> <li>■ Conference</li> <li>■ Share session</li> <li>■ Genre writing (fiction, nonfiction, and poetry)</li> </ul>
Reading workshop	9:40–10:20: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Comprehension strategies               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Pearson and Fielding model</li> <li>■ Mixed ability groups</li> <li>■ Variety of texts</li> </ul> </li> <li>■ Strategies of good readers               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Visualizing</li> <li>■ Making predictions</li> <li>■ Making connections</li> <li>■ Asking questions</li> <li>■ Summarizing</li> <li>■ Monitoring</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	9:00–9:40: Classes A and C 9:40–10:20: Classes B and D <i>Rotation of activities (3 x 13 minutes):</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Guided reading               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Novels and nonfiction</li> <li>■ Apply strategies</li> </ul> </li> <li>■ Vocabulary development</li> <li>■ Phonics and spelling (for those who needed it)</li> </ul> <i>After Easter</i> 9:00–9:30 Classes A and C 9:30–10:00 Classes B and D <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Three groups in each class</li> <li>■ Each teacher works with a group for 30 minutes on multiple strategy use and reciprocal teaching</li> </ul>
Word work	10 minutes: Vocabulary development	10 minutes: Teacher discretion <i>After Easter</i> 20 minutes: Teacher discretion

collaborative nature of the intervention and deepen understanding of the reality, complexity, and challenges involved in responsive teaching.

**Ongoing Focus on Assessment.** Successful schools focus on systematically monitoring student achievement to ensure standards are being met (Au et al., 2008; Designs for Change, 1997; Johnson & Asera, 1999). This helps to sharpen teachers' appreciation of where students need help and where they themselves need support to address students' needs. Formative assessment data were gathered daily on reading, writing, and word work as students engaged in collaborative and independent activities. Teachers used running records, checklists, observations, and conferences and examined the quality of students' work samples to see if learning transferred to independent work.

During the intervention, standardized tests, administered twice each year, helped teachers see how well students were progressing relative to their

peers nationally, and outcomes were shared and analyzed at group meetings. This focus on assessment helped class teachers document students' strengths and weaknesses and target differentiated instruction appropriately in small groups on the days when the special education team came into the classrooms to work alongside the teachers. It also ensured greater cohesion between classroom and support teaching on the days students were withdrawn from the classroom (see Table 3 for sample schedule).

## Intervention Outcomes

### School and Teacher Outcomes

#### Increased Expertise and Stronger Self-Efficacy.

The professional development program was designed to enhance teachers' expertise and, at the same time, raise their confidence and self-efficacy. Bandura (1995) defined self-efficacy as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action

required to manage prospective situations” (p. 2). Furthermore, he stated that “efficacy beliefs influence how people think, feel, motivate themselves and act” (p. 2). Once teachers began to experience success and saw the changes occurring in the motivation and engagement of the students, as well as in their actual achievement, it empowered the teachers further.

In final interviews, all teachers were of the opinion that their professional knowledge around literacy had increased greatly. Each classroom teacher also reported increased self-esteem and confidence in their ability to respond to the challenges they were facing on a daily basis:

Well I suppose it has improved my self-esteem too now in myself.... I actually *can* teach reading and literacy, because before you were thinking, oh am I doing this right, am I a good teacher?... At least now I know that it's all based on the best research as well. You're not trying out things that might fail.... We are confident now with everything that we have learned, and we know it works. (Mary, classroom teacher, final interview)

**School as Professional Learning Community.** The development of professional learning communities is an integral part of school change and literacy reform (Au et al., 2008; Hord, 2008; Kinnucan-Welsch, Rosemary, & Grogan, 2006; Taylor et al., 2003). Hord (2008) stated that such communities have a shared vision of the changes they want to bring about and a set of common beliefs, values, and practices. This was certainly true of teachers by the end of the current project, and it came about through the success they had in enhancing students' achievement and sharing their experiences during the change process.

Both classroom and special needs teachers engaged with the same professional readings and took part in a range of professional development activities, which served to bind them together, giving them a common language and frame of reference when discussing literacy. This was apparent when teachers were together, either formally or informally. They valued the opportunity to learn from one another and to discuss at a deep level what they were trying out. They assumed a collective responsibility for piloting new practices in literacy and evaluating their effect on students' learning. Teachers were operating as a “research-based professional learning community” (Hord, 2008, p. 12). All teachers expressed interest in sustaining the change process in the years ahead and expanding it across the school, and were most articulate in outlining how this could be accomplished.

**Life-Long Learning.** Arising from the interest generated by the study, the level of professional development engaged in, and the professional readings provided, the four classroom teachers who participated in all of the professional development activities offered during the intervention were keen to continue to learn more, and toward the end of the study, they enrolled in a course to obtain a professional qualification in literacy. They reported that engaging in the academic work for qualification consolidated their knowledge base and gave them further confidence in themselves. As Bridget remarked,

I'm interested in an area I never thought I'd be interested in. And so for me personally, it has provided me with a huge amount of stimulation in my professional life, and it has offered the experience of success, you know. And I'm always happier when I feel I'm learning something, that I am sort of developing in some way. (Bridget, classroom teacher, final interview)

**Higher Expectations and a Cognitively Challenging Curriculum.** At the end of the study, all of the teachers reported having higher expectations of their students. This is important to the extent that research on educational disadvantage in Ireland (e.g., Archer & Weir, 2004; Eivers et al., 2004) has highlighted a need to raise teachers' expectations. Teachers' higher expectations are exemplified in the following comments from classroom and special needs teachers:

I think I learned so much from it that my own confidence grew, you know, like I said. But my expectations for the children, that really grew. I was like, wow, I wouldn't have thought they could have performed as well as they could, you know, from the start. (Emer, classroom teacher, final interview)

But it was wonderful to raise the bar. And the thing is, not alone did they reach the bar, a lot of the children, they actually surpassed it. (Ellen, SET, final interview)

By the end of the study, teachers were no longer happy to have students just acquire basic skills; the teachers had much higher aspirations. This was apparent from the comments of three of the classroom teachers in final interviews, who discussed the importance of teaching strategies to students, building their metacognition, and providing them with choice in reading and writing workshops.



## Outcomes in Relation to the Students

### Improvements in Motivation and Engagement.

Bandura (1995) argued that teachers who have a strong sense of their instructional efficacy are able to create motivating and stimulating environments for their students and are more likely to provide mastery experiences that in turn nurture their learners' beliefs in themselves. There was strong evidence that, toward the end of the intervention, students were more motivated, and engaged in literacy activities both inside and outside school:

He has speech problems, but he's after coming on. He loves reading. He always has a book in his hand when you see him coming along. (parent, group interview)

I'd read for about an hour...but when I am with my Mam, I do read for two hours, 'cause she does be getting into the book as well! (Caoimhe, student, final interview)

Definitely ability-wise and confidence-wise, they're very, very motivated to write. They love to write, you know. They're very enthusiastic. (Emer, classroom teacher, final interview)

Again another boy, I think his motivation for reading has just really soared. He's the one I keep thinking of with nonfiction, you know. As soon as I started that, he just took off with it. (Geraldine, classroom teacher, final interview)

Of the 20 students interviewed, 19 reported that they enjoyed reading and could name a favorite book and/or author. The majority of students could articulate their reading preferences and three quarters reported reading at home on a daily basis. The remainder read less often.

### More Strategic Approaches to Reading and Writing.

There was also evidence that students had grown in terms of their strategy knowledge, which in turn had given them greater persistence at tasks and increased their confidence. All of the teachers noted students' strategy use and the contribution it had made to their development. For example,

The children's enthusiasm to read and write really shone through and I think that almost all of the children really gained a lot of confidence from learning how to use the different strategies. When they were given the language to talk about the strategies, it gave them the confidence to talk about them and therefore actually realize they can do them. (Geraldine, classroom teacher, final interview)

Yes, they have the strategies, and they know how to apply them. And they know *why* they do such a thing, so that does lead to independence, doesn't it? (Molly, SET, final group interview)

All of the students were able to give examples of several word-identification strategies that they could utilize if they encountered an unfamiliar word:

Well, I think I've changed by...I always give up when I am stuck on a word, but now I use all my tools.... The hardest thing I would think is when you get stuck on a word because you think, oh I won't be able to get this done. But if you use all your tools, then you will get it. (Noreen, student, final interview)

There was greater variation among the students in relation to comprehension strategies (i.e., predicting, visualizing, asking questions, clarifying, summarizing, and making connections). Of the 20 students interviewed, 50% (5 high- and 5 middle-range achievers) were able to define and give examples of all six strategies and reported using some of these strategies while reading independently. A further 20% (4 middle achievers) were somewhat mixed up in the terminology, but were able to name and give a working example of four strategies; they reported that they did not use the strategies much in their independent reading. Three students (all low achievers) could name and explain two strategies, whereas the remaining three (all very low achievers with specific difficulties and poor attendance) were unable to give any examples.

**Improvements in Achievement.** On a standardized reading test, which has grade-level norms for each class level (national average = 100, standard deviation = 15), the average score of students improved from 82 points in February of first grade to 98 in June of second grade—a significant increase of over one standard deviation ( $t = 10.2$ ,  $df = 52$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Kennedy, 2008). Whereas in February of first grade, 50% of students achieved scores at or below the 10th percentile (indicating very low achievement), 11% performed below this benchmark by the end of second grade.

Performance on the standardized spelling test, also with grade-level norms, increased from 94 in February of second grade to 101 in June of second grade—a significant improvement of just under one half of a standard deviation ( $t = 8.1$ ,  $df = 53$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Despite this, a small number of students, including some with less stable home backgrounds, severe spe-

cial educational needs, and very poor attendance, continued to experience difficulties.

Improvement was also observed on a nonstandardized measure of writing. A majority of students scored below level 1 on the criterion writing scale (Wilson, 2002) at the beginning of the intervention, indicating that most of their writing was not decodable by an adult. By the end, the majority scored at level 2A, the level expected of average students in grade 2, indicating that they could write an expressive story with acceptable sentence structure and most words spelled correctly.

## Final Thoughts

The study showed that there is no quick fix (Allington & Walmsley, 2007) to the complex problem of underachievement in literacy. The study indicated that many factors interact in synergistic ways to create the conditions that contributed to the observed gains in achievement, motivation, and engagement of the students and facilitated the changes observed in teachers and in the instructional program for literacy.

Of critical importance to the study was the nature of the collaboration between the facilitator and the teachers and the phased approach taken to the introduction of the balanced literacy framework. The sustained, on-site, multifaceted professional development enhanced teacher expertise and opened up new ways of working with students. The professional readings communicated to teachers that the approaches they were undertaking had been successful in contexts similar to their own, and the demonstrations, planning meetings, and the collaborative approach taken gave teachers the confidence to experiment and take risks with their teaching. As John-Steiner (2000) suggested, adults working in collaboration “create zones of proximal development for each other. Collaboration can be a mirror for each partner—a chance to understand one’s habits, styles, working methods and beliefs through the comparison and contrast with one’s collaborator” (p. 189).

Another vital element was the design of the balanced literacy framework, which was cognitively challenging, integrated, and coherent and took a systematic approach to the development of the essential skills for literacy. Yet this framework allowed for the development of students’ creativity, capitalized on their interests, and offered students choice and control over activities. Formative assessment guided the

design of teachers’ lessons, which were focused on students’ needs and the development of both lower and higher order skills.

The collaborative teaching involving SETs in regular classrooms allowed for instructional density and differentiation, with every child academically engaged throughout each instructional block. Teachers adopted a facilitative role, scaffolding and coaching students as they engaged in applying word-identification and comprehension strategies that teachers had explicitly modeled. Challenging activities were also within students’ zones of proximal development, making success more likely. Teachers understood that literacy is socially mediated and provided a variety of classroom groupings that allowed for collaboration, including mixed-ability pairs and small groups. Reading and writing were promoted at home and many parents took an active role in supporting the work of the classroom.

These factors created the conditions to motivate and engage students in ways that teachers had not seen before and contributed to the positive gains in achievement. In turn, the response of the students to the changes and the gains in achievement served to strengthen and further enhance teachers’ self-efficacy and, just as importantly, raised their expectations for the students. Success fueled the teachers’ desire to learn more about the literacy process, introduce more changes in line with the research base, and share expertise with colleagues not yet involved in the intervention. The success created a school dynamic and sense that there was much that could be done to enhance achievement and contributed to a school vision in which all staff focused on the goal of not only enhancing achievement but also developing students as readers and writers who could use literacy as a tool for personal goals.

The teachers also experienced some challenges in the course of the intervention, including difficulty in accessing the required 90 minutes per day for literacy instruction, difficulty finding planning time

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after the collaborative sessions, and frustration with the poor attendance of some students. However, the sense of collegiality among teachers and progress among students ensured that the program continued to be implemented.

The intervention clearly aligns with the draft principles of Response to Intervention (RTI) outlined by the International Reading Association (2009):

- Prevention of reading difficulties through the optimization of classroom instructional programs
- Responsive teaching and differentiated instruction
- Careful assessment to inform planning and teaching
- A collaborative approach between classroom teachers, other professionals, and parents
- A systemic and comprehensive approach as the teachers and school sought to devise a solution to underachievement that was relevant and sustainable to their own particular context
- Further enhancement of the expertise of the teachers in relation to the philosophy and intent underpinning the new methodologies, so they could adapt instruction to the specific needs of the students and lead change in their schools

Honoring teachers' individuality created a strong change program, and teachers invested a lot of their personal time and energy in the process. As Au et al. (2008) argued, policymakers who want to effect changes in literacy achievement in urban schools would do well to treat teachers as professionals, "as creators, not just receivers of curriculum" (p. 170). It remains to be seen if the political will is there to provide the level and intensity of support needed for real change. The stakes are high; a multifaceted approach to raising achievement in literacy, such as the one outlined here, holds much promise for the future.

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